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AUTHOR Sullivan, Dale
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ABSTRACT

Because technical writing is a subject that exists in two separate contexts (a combination of practical and liberal arts), teachers of the subject must legitimize their profession by appealing to different authorities. Those attempting to strengthen the connections with the industrial world do so by (1) showing that technical writing is needed, (2) studying the way it is practiced in the real world and making present practice definitive, (3) creating courses that simulate real-life writing, and (4) emphasizing the need for teachers to have practical experience in the profession. Other writers argue that teaching technical writing is more than mere training, that writing is more than a set of techniques. Their articles can be seen as pieces of rhetoric aimed at their colleagues in the liberal arts tradition, focusing on such topics as the use of communication/rhetorical theory to evaluate present practice, the application of theory to the subject of technical writing, the definition of technical writing, and the argument that English teachers can and should teach technical writing. From a rhetorical perspective, these articles are performing a valuable service. Since their immediate audience is the community of technical writing teachers, they can be seen as epideictic discourse that reinforces the faithful and continues to shape the community's view of what the discipline is. Thirty-one references are listed. (HOD)

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CONNECTIONS WITH THE LIBERAL ARTS AND INDUSTRY: ATTEMPTS TO LEGITIMIZE THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING TECHNICAL WRITING

Dale Sullivan

Kansas Technical Institute

Salina, Kansas 67401

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CONNECTIONS WITH THE LIBERAL ARTS AND INDUSTRY: ATTEMPTS TO LEGITIMIZE THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING TECHNICAL WRITING

A little more than twenty years ago Richard Weaver lamented the decline of rhetoric in this century, saying the responsiblity of teaching rhetoric had been "given to just about anybody who [would] take it."[1] The same can often be said about technical writing. Teachers of technical writing teach a course in high demand but with low prestige. Elizabeth Harris says English departments view technical writing as "a despised stepchild tolerated for its powerful connections."[2] Earl Britton says, "tech writing courses have regularly occupied a secondary place in the faculty hierarchy."[3] And Paul Anderson claims that those involved with technical communication need to work at becoming a recognized discipline in the learned world.[4]

Why do teachers of technical writing sense that their profession is in need of legitimizing? One obvious reason is that technical writing is an emerging subject in college curricula across the nation. Like teachers of any new course, teachers of technical writing must form themselves into a profession with goals and methods. Beyond having goals and methods, members of a profession also perceive themselves as part of a group that has a common view of reality, a view that is in the process of being shaped through the rhetoric of those in the group. Part of developing that common view is the process of defining the discipline's function and scope. This goal is especially hard to achieve because technical writing is a hybrid subject, a combination of the practical arts and the liberal arts. The practical arts are legitimized by their usefulness; whereas, the liberal arts are legitimized by their tradition of scholarship. The very name,

"technical writing," contains elements of technique associated with the industrial and business worlds and elements of art associated with scholarship. Because technical writing is a subject that exists in two separate contexts, teachers of the subject must legitimize their profession by appealing to different authorities.

Additionally, teachers of technical writing have three audiences who need to be convinced that the subject is worthy of respect: 1) the customers in industry, 2) the student customer, and 3) colleagues in the academic world. Recent articles and papers in the field can be seen as pieces of rhetoric attempting to legitimize the profession of teaching technical writing. Because technical communication is so closely tied with the world of work, some articles try to strenghten that connection, attempting to persuade these customers that the product for sale is tailored for their needs. Additionally, because technical writing is part of a long academic tradition that studies language use, others who identify with that tradition try to strengthen its connections with communication theory, rhetoric, and literary history. This last audience is especially hard to convince because they are suspicous of any course that teaches a skill. They suspect that a writing course can degenerate into nothing more than a skills course and become a species of training rather than education, further eroding the liberal arts tradition. As C. S. Lewis said, "If education is beaten by training, civilization dies."[5]

Those attempting to strengthen the connections with the industrial world do so in four ways: 1) they show that technical writing is needed, 2) they study the way it is practiced in the real world and make present

practice definitive, 3) they create courses that simulate real-life writing, and 4) they emphasize the need for teachers to have practical experience in the profession.

Because students often doubt that technical writing is an important course and because they don't realize how important good writing skills will be in their careers, researchers have conducted surveys to determine the importance of writing skills and have written articles which 1) give statistics about how much time is spent writing on the job and 2) contain quotations from people in industry about the value of good writing skills. Several such articles exist, but one good example is by Charlene Spretnak.[6] It reports that engineeers spend nearly fifty percent of their time communicating, either writing or reading. The article also has an extensive list of quotations from people in industry about the need for good writing skills. For instance, the following is just one testimonial contained in the article:

> Technical skills open the doors of career opportunities, but reading and writing skills are absolutely essential for taking advantage of the opportunities.[7]

Though articles of this type are usually written for technical writing teachers, prospective students are always kept in mind. Armed with the data and comments in these articles, the teacher can demonstrate the value of the technical writing course and thus legitimize it in the students' minds.

Another type of article that shows need is exemplified in Richard Schmelzer's "New Responsibilities for the Technical Writer."[8] In this article, Schmelzer argues that the continued existence of democracy will depend in large part on the ability of writers to interpret technological

information about issues of concern for the voter. This type of article is aimed at the teachers of writing in an attempt to encourage them.

A second approach to strengthening technical writing's connections with the real world is the study of present practice. These studies assume that technical writing is a particular genre of discourse and is best taught when the practices of industry are transferred to the classroom. One example of this type of study is Edmund Dandridge's "Notes Toward a Definiton of Technical Writing,"[9] which defines technical writing according to stylistic features discovered in documents produced in the industry. By studying these documents, Dandridge was able to determine that technical writing consists of shorter sentences and paragraphs than non-technical writing. Therefore, students should be taught to use short sentences and paragraphs. This approach argues that technical writing teachers are to be respected because they can turn out students already familiar with the practices of writers in the industry. The major objection to this approach would be that it seems to reduce technical writing to a skills course rather than a true liberal arts course. Thus, technical writing is legitimized by being placed in a context which values its services at the expense of its role as a course that educates the whole person. Students learn writing techniques so that they can perform a particular function in the organizational machine. That is, they are defined by their roles in their jobs rather than as complete human beings. A second objection to this approach is that present practice in industry is not always a good example. The overall needs of the industrial world should be considered, but present practice is weak. If present practice is not adequate, it

should not be set up as a standard of achievement for technical writing students.

There is, however, another way that studies of present practice can be used as rhetoric. These studies analyze the readers of technical reports and the channels through which information is passed and then recommend teaching practices. One example of this kind of study is Elizbeth Tebeaux's article about the importance of dictation in industry, which shows the frequency of dictation, calls for more instruction in dictation, and suggests ways of teaching that skill.[10] Another is R. John Brockman's article that recommends instruction in cooperative writing, creative graphics, and interpersonal communication.[11] This type of article seems to be more valuable than those that assume present practice should be imitated. They help teachers understand the context of writing in industry while, at the same time, attempting to convince customers in industry that the content of tech writing courses is pertinent to their concerns.

Another attempt to legitimize technical writing courses to industrial customers has been the development of courses that try to simulate industrial writing situations. These courses could be placed on a continuum from courses actually taught in companies--as described by Fleischhaurer[12] and others--to in-class corporations--as described by Ben and Marthalee Barton[13]--to holistic cases--an example is Dean Hall's recent paper at the 1984 Midwest ASEE conference[14]--to team-taught courses--as described by Nancy Roundy.[15] Several articles describing variations of these types of classes are available. All have in common the belief that technical writing students should write to realistic audiences, using realistic information, in situations similar to those in industry. These articles

attempt to legitimize technical writing by claiming that the training techniques employed are based on industrial models and are likely to help students adjust to the writing problems they encounter once they leave school; accordingly, their rhetorical audience seems to be customers in industry.

A fourth way that authors attempt to strengthen connections with industry is to write articles insisting that teachers of technical writing need professional experience as technical writers. One article has been the focus of a lot of discussion. Mathes, Stevenson, and Klaver argue that professors in the technical courses should teach technical writing because they have a better understanding than English teachers of the subject matter and the situations in which writing is required in industry.[16] They claim that English teachers are ill prepared to teach the course. Another article of the same type is R. S. Kellner's, "A Question of Competency,"[17] which claims that English teachers display hubris when they presume to teach technical writing. These articles may legitimize the discipline of technical writing by elevating it above the level of the non-specialist, but they do so at the expense of making technical writing into a technology, something for which a person needs training but not education. Thus, in an attempt to strengthen technical writing in the eyes of industry, these articles ignore the legitimizing power of tradition. The basis for legitimacy shifts with the audience, (training works for industry, education for colleagues in English departments).

Other writers argue that teaching technical writing is more than mere training, that writing is more than a set of techniques. Their articles

can be seen as pieces of rhetoric aimed at their colleagues in the liberal arts tradition. These articles usually fall into one of four categories: 1) those that use communication/rhetorical theory to evaluate present practice, 2) those that apply theory to the subject of technical writing, 3) those that define technical writing by associating it with the liberal arts tradition, or 4) those that argue directly that English teachers can and should teach technical writing.

The first approach, using theory as a basis for studying and evaluating present practice, usually results in case studies which resemble the studies of industry described earlier in this paper. In fact, they could be classified under the same head, except they ground their investigations in communication or composition theory. For example, Odell and Goswami studied the writing practices of writers in a social services agency to determine if the writers made decisions based on rhetorical considerations.[18] They found that writers do consider the rhetorical situation when they write, but they also found that the writers prefer the passive voice to active voice. Although this preference is not evaluated in the article, the reader familiar with readability studies would infer that such a preference is not supported by theory. Jack Selzer's analysis of an engineer's writing process is another example of how composition theory prepares the technical writing teacher to investigate present practice and look at crucial elements in that practice.[19] These studies have a decidedly authoritative air about them, because the writers are grounding their studies in composition theory.

Another approach is to apply theory from a variety of disciplines prescriptively to pedagogy or writing practice. Linda Flower describes a

pedagogical practice similar to those described earlier, i.e., case studies. Her article could be placed along side the others, except the method is based on theory rather than in present practice.[20] The article draws on rhetorical theory by referencing Bitzer's "Rhetorical Situation," and on cognitive psychology by discussing the essential cognitive task of the writer, reordering information stored in memory. Carol Lipson applies communication theory to the opening of technical reports, appealing to linguistics, speech, rhetoric, and cognitive psychology in an attempt to alter the present practice of writing technical reports. She argues that reports presently contain too much redundancy which reduces readability.[21] This article is an excellent example of a teacher of technical writing suggesting improvements in present practice, and having the authority to do so because of extensive research into related fields. Other articles draw on classical rhetoric,[22] Kinneavy's theory of discourse,[23] or the history and philosophy of science.[24] The articles, when viewed as rhetoric, would seem to be aimed at academic colleagues in an attempt to prove that technical writing is more than a skills course, involving those types of attitudes and knowledge associated with true education rather than simple training.

A third approach is to define technical writing by placing it in a liberal arts tradition. This can be done by showing that it has a history, or by demonstrating connections with such areas as literature or creative writing, or by directly placing it in a discipline like rhetoric. An example of an article that looks at the history of technical writing is James Miller's "What Can the Technical Writer of the Past Teach the Techni-

cal Writer of Today?"[25] Miller discusses twelve technical writers ranging from Roman times to this century and concludes that technical writing has not always been practiced as it is today. Such a study shows that technical writing has a long history and should be considered a liberal art. At the same time it serves as a corrective to closed mindedness that can develop when present practice is seen as definitive. Several attempts have been made to make connections between technical writing and other liberal arts. A particularly fruitful source here is literature from other eras. For instance, Deborah Kilgore has shown that Moby Dick is a good handbook for technical writers,[26] and Elizabeth Tebeaux recommends that students in technical writing study Franklin's Autobiography.[27] As English majors increasingly fill the ranks of technical writing teachers, this sort of study is likely to become more common. Here, again, teachers are beginning to draw on a rich background in language arts, applying it to the teaching of technical writing. Although Mathes cringes at the thought of bringing literature into a technical writing course, this approach, if used judiciously, can enrich the course and elevate it above the level of a skills course. By raising it above the level of a skills course, teachers of technical writing are able to legitimize the profession of teaching technical writing to their colleagues in the liberal arts who see a college education as being more than mere preparation for a niche in the technological society.

Another way of making connections with the liberal arts is to argue directly that technical writing is part of a tradition. Several excellent articles of this type are available. S. Michael Halloran, for example, argues that technical writing should be defined in terms of classical

rhetoric's notion of eloquence.[28] Elizabeth Harris argues that liberal arts studies like literary theory, rhetoric, linguistics, and the history and philosophy of science have much to offer technical writing.[29] And Carolyn Miller claims that, since science and technology are intersubjective disciplines, technical writing is rhetoric and should be a kind of enculturation, addressing the understanding as well as teaching skills.[30]

All the above approaches linking technical writing to the liberal arts share a common assumption, clearly stated by Halloran and Miller. Writing is more than a skill; it is a way of seeing reality and a way of arguing for particular views of reality. Technical writing is legitimized, not merely because it is practical--though it is that--but because it involves understanding. Rather than producing students who can copy formats, courses taught with this philosophy produce students who develop into mature human beings. As Halloran puts it, students learn eloquence rather than technique, eloquence being a virtue that is part of the person and technique being a method that is separated from the writer. These articles seem to be aimed at academic colleagues, once again arguing that the teaching of technical writing is a profession worthy of full acceptance in the tradition of a liberal arts education.

The fourth type of argument that strengthens technical writing's connections with the academic world is that which claims English teachers make good teachers of the subject. These articles need to be seen in relationship to those arguing that teachers need practical experience. In fact, most of them have been written in response to Mathes, Stevenson, and Klaver's article. Perhaps the best article of the kind, or at least the

best known, is Keith Hull's "Notes from the Besieged, or Why English Teachers Should Teach Technical Writing".[31] His basic argument is that the training received by English majors is a case of overkill. They have read a large quantity and variety of literature, studied it closely, and written technical papers about it. His article is built on the assumption that technical writing is a subdiscipline of the larger discipline, language arts. Another article that argues the potential of English teachers is by Whitburn.[32] He suggests that teachers of technical writing are in the position to teach rhetoric as it was originally envisioned by Quintilian. Quintilian insisted that the ideal orator was to be involved with the everyday life of his society. Whitburn suggests that English teachers have been secluded from the real world far too long. They can now begin to have an impact on their society by joining the ranks of technical writing teachers and adding to the profession their expertise in such fields as genre studies. In contrast to those which argue that English teachers are not qualified, these articles appeal to a different authority as the basis for their legitimacy, because they are aimed at a different audience, one that values a formal education above practical experience.

From a rhetorical perspective, these articles--both those making connections with industry and those making connections with the liberal arts--are performing a valuable service. Since their immediate audience is the community of technical writing teachers, they can be seen as epideictic discourse that reinforces the faithful and continues to shape the community's view of what the discipline is. In short, they are attempting to define the function and scope of technical writing, an endeavor that must be the cornerstone of any profession. Is teaching technical writing

merely training, or is it education in its best sense? Does its scope include the liberal arts or not? Is it a servant of the technological society, or is it an agent of change independent of the autonomous power of technology?

These questions will be answered only through the continuing dialogue in professional papers and articles. As Anderson points out, a discipline must pose problems, generate alternative solutions, and choose the best solutions.[33] This process will inevitably be accomplished through the rhetoric of those who teach technical writing. The profession will be legitimized when it is recognized as a true profession by our colleagues. Certainly one mark of a profession is the movement toward a consensualist view of reality through the continued interchange of ideas by its members. Technical writing is in the difficult but enviable positon of having one foot firmly planted in the industrial world and the other in the liberal arts. The final consensus about the role of technical writing teachers must not emphasize one connection at the expense of the other. If we avoid the temptation of aligning ourselves in competing camps, and if we continue to build stronger connections with both worlds, the activity of teaching technical writing should emerge as a profession respected by industry and academics as well.

Dale Sullivan

NOTES

[1]Richard M. Weaver, "Language is Sermonic," in Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric: Selected Readings, Richard L. Johannesen, ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 163-179.

[2]Elizabeth Harris, "In Defense of the Liberal-Arts Approach to Technical Writing," College English, 44 (6) Oct. 1982, 630.

[3]W. E. Britton, "The Trouble with Technical Writing is Freshman Compositon," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, (1974), 127-131; in Directions in Technical Writing, Gould, ed. (Farmingdale, New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1978), 132.

[4]Paul V. Anderson, "The Need for Better Research in Technical Communication," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 10 (4) 1980, 272.

[5]Quoted in Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, C. S. Lewis: A Biography (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), 150.

[6]Charlene M. Spretnak, "A Survey of the Frequency and Importance of Technical Communication in an Engineering Career," The Technical Writing Teacher, 9 (3) Spring 1982, 133-36.

[7]Spretnak, 134.

[8]Richard W. Schmelzer, "New Responsibilities for the Technical Writer," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication 11 (3) 1981, 217-221.

[9]Edmund Dandridge, Jr., "Notes Toward a Definition of Technical Writing," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication 3, 1973, 265-71.

[10]Elizabeth Tebeaux, "Keeping Technical Writing Relevant (Or, How to Become a Dictator)," College English 45 (2) Feb. 1983, 174-183.

[11]R. John Brockman, "Taking a Second Look at Technical Communications Pedagogy," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication 10 (4) 1980, 283-91.

[12]F. W. Fleischhauer, "Meeting the Writing Needs of Business and Industry," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication 11 (3) 1981, 223-32.

[13]Ben F. and Marthalee S. Barton, "The Case Method: Bridging the Gap between Engineering Student and Professional," in Courses, Components, and Exercises in Technical Communication, Dwight W. Stevenson, ed. (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981), 22-33.

[14]Dean G. Hall, "Bridging the Gap: Simulation Writing in Engineering Communication Course," 1984 Midwest ASEE Proceedings, Section IA.

[15]Nancy Roundy, "Team-Teaching Technical Writing: Audience Analysis and the Lab Report," Engineering Education, Feb. 1982, 395-96.

[16]J. C. Mathes, Dwight W. Stevenson, and Peter Klaver, "Technical Writing: The Engineering Educator's Responsibility," Engineering Education, 69, Jan. 1979, 331-34.

[17]R. S. Kellner, "A Question of Competency," ABCA Bulletin, 45 (3) Sept. 1982, 5-10.

[18]Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami, "Writing in a Non-Academic Setting," Research in Teaching English, 16 (3) Oct. 1982, 201-223.

[19]Jack Slezer, "The Composing Processes of an Engineer," College Composition and Communication, 34 (2) May 1983, 178-87.

[20]Linda S. Flower, "Communication Strategy in Professional Writing: Teaching a Rhetorical Case," in Stevenson, 34-46.

[21]Carol S. Lipson, "Theoretical and Empirical Considerations for Designing Openings of Technical and Business Reports," Journal of Business Communication, 20 (1) Winter 1983, 41-53.

[22]Andrea Lunsford, "Classical Rhetoric and Technical Writing," College Composition and Communication, 27 (3) Oct. 1976, 289-91.

[23]Elizabeth Harris, "Applications of Kinneavy's Theory of Discourse to Technical Writing," College English, 40 (6) Feb. 1979, 625-32.

[24]Carolyn Miller, "Technology as a Form of Consciousness: A Study of Contemporary Ethos," Central States Speech Journal, 29, 1978, 228-36.

[25]Walter James Miller, "What Can the Technical Writer of the Past Teach the Technical Writer of Today?" IRE Transactins on Engineering Writing and Speech EWS-4, No. 3, December 1961, in Technical and Professional Writing, Herman Estrin, ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 260-278.

[26]Deborah Kilgore, "Moby Dick: A Whale of a Handbook for Technical Writing Teachers," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 11 (3) 1981, 209-16.

[27]Elizabeth Tebeaux, "Franklin's Autobiography: Important Lessons in Tone, Syntax, and Persona," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 11, 1981, 341-349.

[28]S. Michael Halloran, "Eloquence in a Technological Society," Central States Speech Journal, 29, 1978, 221-227.

[29]Elizabeth Harris, "In Defense of the Liberal-Arts Approach to Technical Writing," College English, 44 (6) Oct. 1982, 628-36.

[30]Carolyn Miller, "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing," College English, 40 (6) Feb. 1979, 610-17.

[31]Keith Hull, "Notes from the Besieged, or Why English Teachers Should Teach Technical Writing," College English, 41, April 1980, 876-83.

[32]Merrill D. Whitburn, "The Ideal Orator and Literary Critic as Technical Communicators: An Emerging Revolution in English Departments," in Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse, Robert J. Connors, et. al. eds. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 226-47.

[33]Paul V. Anderson, "The Need for Better Research in Technical Communication." See note 4.

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